

FICTION BY THE BEST WRITERS

The God of her People By James Oliver Curwood

A stirring tale of romance and adventure which shows the difference between the white man's god and the red man's god.

Inspector McBain of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police did not go into sentimental detail when he called in Philip Needham from barracks and explained to him the trouble that was brewing up at the headquarters of the Beaver. He introduced him to Jean Pierrot, the slim, soft-voiced, French half-breed who had come down through three hundred miles of wilderness with the news, and who sat with his big dark eyes staring hard at Philip.

"Inspector went over in five minutes the facts which had according to three-quarters of an hour to tell. 'The Sarcees and the Swamp Crees are ready to jump at one another's throats up on the Beaver,' said the Inspector. 'The trouble began with a fight in which the Sarcees murdered a missionary, and that is all.'"

"Non, M'sieur," replied the half-breed. "They did not murder him. They killed him." "God save us!" chuckled the big Inspector. "Here's a half savage from the jungle who sees a difference between murder and killing which he doesn't see in law. Philip, according to our code the missionary was murdered, and the affair has started trouble that promises a tribal war. I'm not going to send a dozen or half a dozen men up there to stop the fight. I'm going to send you—alone—as peace-maker, and to bring back as many of the Sarcees as you like, Cockburn, as factor on the Beaver and you can get all of the assistance you want from him and the Crees. The trouble started over a woman. She's a young Cree. Maballa is her name. Jean says, and you may have heard her back with you, she's the pagan and a renegade, for she has left the Crees to join the Sarcees."

It was the second day after, when they were resting from a hard portage on the lower Sturgeon, that Jean Pierrot had said to what the Inspector had said: "Sometimes, M'sieur," he said in his low quiet voice, "I think that there must be more than one God—that there must be three, your God, and mine, and a God for such as she and her people."

Philip was lighting his pipe, but paused until the flame of his match burned the tips of his fingers. "Maballa, you mean," he said, striking another. "Yes, Maballa, M'sieur—and the Sarcees."

"They are pagans," said Philip, puffing out smoke, "so how can they have a God?" "There was a time when I believed that there was but one God, M'sieur," replied Jean. "I am a Catholic, and I carry an ivory cross of the Virgin on my breast. I thought there was but one God—our God—until I was sent to school at Montreal. After that I worked for the Great Company for three years, and I saw a great deal of your God—the God of what I heard called Civilization. It is a different God from the God of our big North; down there, where I was, the Virgin is a different God. You worship Him in your big churches on one day, and then for the six days that follow you lie, you cheat, you ruin one another, you break the ten commandments. We have no churches. Our God is about us, in the forest, in the air, in the night play of the aurora; we don't shout His name, we don't have brass bands to work for Him, but most of us wear His crosses and live up to Him in our way. For these reasons I know there are no Gods, M'sieur, yours, and I almost believe there is a third—for her people."

Something in the manner of Jean's saying these things stirred Philip strangely. The half-breed's dark eyes glowed with a warm fire. His thin sensitive face seemed to glow with an emotion which he fought to keep back. There was the graceful poise of an animal in his slender, steel-sinewed body as he hunched himself over to peer up the river; a fascinating look about him—in the sun shining in his jet-black hair, in the soft Creole melody of his voice, the cool daring of his eyes. "And what kind of a God would you have for a pagan God?" queried Philip. "I don't know," said Jean, straightening himself. "I have thought of a good deal, M'sieur, but I don't know. Perhaps you can help me." Philip caught an eager, almost hopeful, look in the other's eyes. "The Sarcees are not only pagans, but the last of what was once a great race. There are less than a score of them, counting women and children, up where we are going, M'sieur. It is what is left of the Lone Arrow tribe. Twenty years ago, when it was much stronger, this tribe came upon a Cree village which had been deserted because of the red plague—the small pox, and in one of the tepees they found a half-dead little boy, deserted by its people. They were dead enemies then—the Crees and the Sarcees, M'sieur—and yet the Sarcees took this babe, and saved its life—because it was a babe, and helpless. I ask you, M'sieur, would a people with out a God have done this—when the other people, the people with a God, abandoned the child to its death? That child, M'sieur, was Maballa, the Cree pagan."

Jean's eyes glinted. "Would a godless people have done that, M'sieur?" he demanded. "No, Jean," was not all," continued Jean, turning his face again up the river, and speaking for a moment as if to no one but himself. "She came to the Post after that, ten years later,

when M'sieur Simpson was factor, and la Madame took a great fancy to her and taught her a great deal that civilized people know. Then she died, la Madame, and the new factor and his Cree wife came to the Post. Maballa loved her adopted people, and for that all the Crees hated her and shunned her. The factor's Cree wife hated her most of all, more than she hated the Sarcees. Three times a year Lone Arrow's son came to the Post with what was left of his father's tribe, and brought their furs, and it was at these times that the young people, grown now to manhood and womanhood, found their hearts beating with love. Pierrot was to his wife and looked far up the river, with his back to Philip.

"The Sarcee band came last to the Post six weeks ago," he finished. "A little before that the new Missioner had come over from Churchill. He was bad, M'sieur. He attempted to force Maballa in a way which is common to the followers of the civilized man's God. Maballa fled to the Sarcee camp, and Sakimay, the pagan son of Lone Arrow, hunted the Missioner out and they fought. The Missioner was killed; so was Sakimay. Their two graves are side by side, so close that you may reach from one to the other. Over the Missioner's grave is the white cross of God; around Sakimay's there is a fence of sapling pickets, tins filled with meat, a tiny canoe, a tepee as large as your hand, and such things made of wood as he will need in the hereafter. There are ten or fifteen of the Sarcees, and they have drawn back a few miles, and guarded themselves. There has been a little fighting, and it is fortunate for the Sarcees that a Cree and a half-breed have been killed, and not a hundred. I think, M'sieur, that they understand why the Sarcees remain, for some day will find them all dead unless they move. I think, M'sieur, it must be because of Maballa. For each day two women come to the graves with their offerings for the dead. One of these is the Missioner's Indian wife, who he turned Christian, and the other is Maballa, the pagan Cree."

For days after this stop at the portage Jean Pierrot spoke no more of Maballa and her people, except to answer Philip's questions. He dropped into the moody silence of the forest man, saying no more than a dozen words at night when they stopped to camp, even when Philip brought up again and again the question of the three Gods. The half-breed was always sitting beside the fire when he was asked his questions, and once he awoke, long after midnight, to find Jean sitting where he had left him hours before. After a time Philip ceased to question him, and began to study him in another way. He knew that something was troubling Jean. Several times when Jean thought him asleep, he saw Pierrot take the ivory cross from his breast and hold it in his hands; and one night, when the spring wind was wafting mournfully through the spruce tops, Jean stood up in the light of the campfire with his hands and arms stretched above his head, as if in an attitude of prayer.

The night before they came to the Post on the Beaver, Pierrot raised his head from between his hands and looked across the fire at Philip, who was smoking his pipe. "M'sieur," he exclaimed suddenly. "I have never seen a more beautiful woman than Maballa, even in Montreal and Quebec. I have seen her with her hair down, M'sieur, falling to her knees, glistening like a raven's wing in the sun. Her voice is like that of the bird-flutes which we make of reeds. I have seen her, M'sieur, and I know that she was not a pagan. I would fight for her, and for her people."

In an instant Philip had gone to his side, and reached down a hand. "Jean Pierrot," he said quietly. "You, too, love this girl?" "Yes, M'sieur," he said slowly. His slim, dark hand met Philip's; in his eyes there glowed a soft light. "Yes, M'sieur, I love her."

He dropped his head again, slowly, and said: "But she has betrayed her God. If I went to her now, after Sakimay's death, and gave her my love, and fought for her, I would be betraying my God—the God of the Virgin—for a woman. For she is a pagan."

As the half-breed walked out into the gloom Philip watched him until his form disappeared among the forest shadows, wondering what the world would be if the God of all people were as omniscient as this God of Jean Pierrot's.

It was the deep gray dusk of a night that promised rain when the canoe of Philip and Jean Pierrot came into the last quarter-water of the Beaver, a quarter of a mile from the Post. Above the thick spruce and balsam there was an unusual glow in the sky, and when their canoe ran into the landing they were greeted by a mad rush of howling dogs and a crowd of Cree masters who looked right and left with short whistles, while a dozen Indian boys shouted and kicked in the faces of the savage huskies. Philip noticed that most of the men carried rifles.

The tumult brought Cockburn, the factor, to the door of the Company store, and when he saw that one of the newcomers was Jean Pierrot he lost no time in shaking hands with Philip, who introduced himself before Jean could speak. Then he looked the door.

"You saw them," he said, rubbing his hands together nervously. "Thirty of the cussedest, blood-thirstiest Crees you ever laid eyes on, and you're here just in time to put the stamp of the law on what they're going to do tomorrow. I can't hold them in another minute. I've got a pretty good idea of the

trouble," said Philip. "What's the latest?" "Sakimay isn't dead," exclaimed the factor.

A low cry escaped Jean Pierrot. It was as if a sudden pain had torn it from his lips.

"He was wounded in the fight with the missionary," went on the factor, "so badly wounded that the Sarcees did not dare to move him. So they

that the others heard nothing of what they said. When they had done Philip offered his hand again to Philip. Then he swung slowly about the wall of dark faces that shut them in and spoke in the Indian tongue.

"This is the White Chief who has come to lead you against Sakimay and the murderers of our people, my brothers," he said. "Even the Great Company obeys him. So Pictou gives up his place to him, and it is he, not

He joined Cockburn, who invited Pictou to smoke with them in the Company store. It was late when the Breed returned to his fire and the factor showed Philip the bunk he was to sleep in. After Cockburn had gone Philip sat up, waiting for Jean.

It was midnight when Pierrot came in. "They refuse, M'sieur," he said.

Philip stared at the strange pallor and the hollow lines in Jean's face.

"They refuse," repeated Pierrot, breathing deeply. "I saw Maballa, and she took me by the hand, M'sieur, and led me into the tepee where Sakimay was lying upon his back. They became man and wife—to-day—according to their law. I gave them your message. I told them what would happen to-morrow, and Sakimay called the others in so that they might hear. There are only eleven who can fight, and to a man they shook their heads when Sakimay said he would give himself up to the White Chief, if it was their will. They are poorly armed. They know what will happen. But they are brave, though they are not a people of God. They are ready to die, M'sieur. Sakimay and Maballa send you their thanks and their love. And Maballa sends you this!"

Jean's voice choked him as he drew a folded bit of buckskin from his pocket. He unwrapped it and there rippled down from between his fingers a long, shining tress of hair. He held it above his waist and it swept the floor. His eyes shone softly and his hand trembled as he gave it to Philip.

"It is beautiful," breathed Philip, wondering, as the softness of it touched his fingers. "But—I don't understand."

"M'sieur," cried Jean, bending forward, "this is the greatest thing that a Sarcee maiden can give to a man, next to her love. In the old days when the Sarcees were a powerful tribe if a girl asked the favor of a man by word of mouth only, he could grant it or not, as he wished, but if she gave him a tress of her hair it bound him even to death in her service. To refuse her then, if there was no dishonor in her request, would be the same as your refusing assistance to a white woman pleading for help in the hands of ruffians. Maballa sends her prayer to you. It is that you have her and Sakimay taken to their old home in the Swan River country, and buried there—in one grave. It is her last confession that she has no God, and that she will die a pagan, with Sakimay." Jean bowed his head. "Will you do this, M'sieur?"

He started as he felt the soft crush of Maballa's hair against his hand. His eyes met Philip's.

"This is yours, Jean," said Philip gently. "Can't you understand? Maballa sent it to me—and intended it for you. It is yours and I will help you to carry them back to their old home—if they die."

"You think she meant this—for me?" Philip laughed and gripped Jean's hand. "My poor Pierrot, are you blind?" With a joyous cry Jean pressed the silken tress to his lips.

"Then she has given to me—to me—something," he said. "It is next to that which she has given to him." He turned toward the door and stopped. In the shadow his eyes glowed like black garnets. "I am sorry there are not three Gods, M'sieur. If there were I would go and fight for her."

A little before dawn Philip went with Pierrot and the factor to the Indian camp. The Crees were ready and waiting. Their dogs were tugging at the ends of babiche thongs tied to trees, and the boys and women were huddled in a silent group about the farthest fire. Pictou was looking for them and advanced across the open to meet them.

There was no excitement as he and Philip, with the factor and Pierrot behind them, led the way into the gloom of the forest. The Cree fighters fell in behind them like shadows. Their moccasined feet made no sound upon the damp earth; there was no whispering of one man to another, nothing but a grim, terrible silence as they passed through the thick spruce and into a black rock-strewn break between two mountainous ridges. Overhead broke the first gray light of day, and at every twist and turn something which he could not resist drew Philip's eyes behind him. Always there were the same faces at his back, dark, sullen, unresponsive, filling him with a growing realization of his own powerlessness. He overtook Pictou

and caught him by the arm. The Breed stopped, and Philip said to Cockburn: "Tell him to say this to his people—that the man who does not obey my commands will be strangled or shot."

"It is best not to say that," objected Cockburn.

"Tell them!" commanded Philip. "By God, if I could talk their language!"

He whirled fiercely on the waiting Crees, and Pictou repeated Cockburn's warning. There was no change in the sullen faces.

"What do they say?" he demanded. "Hear for yourself," replied Cockburn. "They say nothing."

Philip motioned Pictou on and swung his carbine from his shoulder to the hollow of his arm. Half an hour later Jean said, "We are within a quarter of a mile of their camp, M'sieur."

Philip turned to the Crees with a sudden, sharp command. They crowded up to him, looking beyond him to Pictou.

"Tell Pictou what to say," he said to Cockburn. "Jean and I are going on alone to Sakimay's camp. If they surrender, there will be no fight. If they don't, we will return inside of an hour."

He walked on past Pictou, with Jean close beside him. He did not look back until they had gone a hundred yards up the chasm. The Crees were packed about Pictou, who was towering from a rock in their center.

"I'm drawing the first easy breath since we started, Jean," he exclaimed. "I wish to Heaven that horde was a hundred miles from here!"

"So do I, M'sieur," they passed behind a mass of broken rock and Pierrot caught Philip suddenly by the arm. For the first time he showed excitement. "Quick, M'sieur—follow me," he entreated. "We have not one moment to lose. I will show you something. I swear that you may have faith in me. Come!"

He turned and began leaping from rock to rock up the broken side of the mountain. At the top of the ridge he stopped and waited. Philip was panting when he reached him. Jean gave him no time to speak.

"Hurry, M'sieur," he urged. "There is a nearer way, but this is best."

The sun was rising in their faces and lighted up Jean's eyes with a red fire. The Breed moved with the sureness of one of the gray mountain cats, finding footing where Philip stumbled and slipped. Not until they had gone nearer a half mile than a quarter did Pierrot stop for a third time and wait for his companion. Philip was struggling hard for breath when he came up, but there was scarce a break in Jean's voice as he drew him cautiously to the broken edge of the ridge and said, "Look, M'sieur—look down there!"

Five hundred feet below them in a small green meadow shut in on two sides by walls of rock was the Sarcee camp. From where he crouched Philip found himself looking straight up the chasm. The break between the two ridges ended in the little meadow below. All this he took in at a glance, even before he had made sure that there was no life about the tepees, and that Sakimay's camp was deserted.

"They've gone," he said aloud to Pierrot.

Jean placed a warning finger on his lips.

"No, M'sieur," he whispered, "they are not gone."

Foot by foot he crept down among the rocks. At last he came to a precipitous ledge and peered over. Philip drew himself to the edge and clutched at the rocks as he looked straight down to the base of the mountain. Huddled below him were a dozen women and children. He had time to see that one of these women was standing with her face turned up the chasm, and that she stood beside a man bolstered against a rock. He drew back, dizzy.

"The women and children are there, with Maballa and Sakimay," said Jean. "Sakimay is badly wounded. I doubt if he will live, even if the Crees give him a chance. There were three old men in the camp last night. They have gone with the others—to fight."

"What do you mean?" demanded Philip. "Where have they gone?"

"There!" replied Jean. He pointed up the chasm, where the tips of the black rocks were beginning to catch the glow of the sun. "This is a matter of Indian, M'sieur. That is why I brought you up behind the camp instead of down the chasm. You will understand—and pardon me—when you see what happens. Look—look there!"

A quarter of a mile away the break between the mountains was filled with moving figures.

"The Crees!" gasped Pierrot. "Now, M'sieur, watch what happens!"

Philip dug his fingers into Jean's arm. "We are too late!"

"Yes, too late," said Pierrot, pointing up the chasm. "See! They are almost to that black streak of rock that runs across the break from one wall to the other, and the Sarcees must be there. They are within easy range. *Mon Dieu*, a strong arm could throw a stone to them now!"

Suddenly a shot rang out. It was followed by a scattering fusillade of others, and then the fire of the Cree rifles rolled in thunderous echoes between the black walls of the mountains. It was Jean's hand that gripped Philip now. His fingers dug in deeper as the Crees advanced, dodging from rock to rock, firing with their repeaters. As yet the two watchers could see nothing of the Sarcees ambushed among the broken masses of trap and limestone. The sound of their rifles were drowned in the heavy roar of the Cree guns.

"God in Heaven," breathed Jean in dismay. "Sakimay's people have nothing but single-shot guns, a half of them loaded with powder and ball! They are lost—lost—"

He stopped and sprang to his feet. The Sarcees were running back now, fighting from rock to rock, and for the first time there came to them the yells of the pursuing Crees. At first Philip counted ten, then nine—and then eight of Sakimay's people. He was counting again when something drew his eyes to the meadow below.

A figure was running swiftly toward the scene of battle. It was a woman. Her long black hair streamed out in a shining mass in the sun. In her hand she carried a rifle.

Philip glanced quickly at Jean. "Maballa," said Pierrot quietly.

He was drawing something from his breast, but Philip did not wait to see what it was. Under his eyes the last of a race were dying, and he scarce breathed as he looked upon the tragedy. He saw now that half a dozen women had taken hold of the litter on which Sakimay lay. They carried it out into the meadow, following Maballa, and as they staggered under its weight they chanted a song which came faintly up to the top of the cliff. The women stopped when the remnant of the Sarcee band came to the edge of the meadow. There were six of the fighters left. Sheltered for a moment from the Cree fire they ran to Sakimay and knelt beside him, their guns waiting for the Crees. Behind them stood Maballa, straight and tall, the sun glowing like fire in her hair.

Jean touched Philip's arm. "Look, M'sieur," he said.

On the flat face of the rock before him glinted the silken tress which Maballa had sent to Philip, and beside it, gleaming white and pure, was Jean Pierrot's cross of the Virgin.

"M'sieur," he said, with a strange quiver in his voice, "there are but two Gods to Jean Pierrot. There is your God and there is mine—and my God is the God of Maballa and her people."

His rifle glittered in the sun. There was nothing to shelter the Crees from him, and death burst upon them from the top of the cliff.

Philip caught up his carbine. "And there is but one law in such a case as this," he said. "Here goes—in the name of the King!"

The Crees fell back before the deadly fire of the two rifles. Only a third of them reached the shelter of the rocks. And still the fire pursued them along the top of the chasm, until Philip caught the hot barrel of Jean's Winchester in his hand and turned it to the sky.

"Enough!" he said, breathing hard. They looked back. The group in the meadow was moving. It climbed slowly up the steep side of the ridge, the litter borne in its midst. At the top the figures were silhouetted against the sun. Jean leaped high up on a rock, and from the motionless group of a mile away one figure moved slowly out and stood for a moment, alone.

"May the Great God bless you, forever, and forever," said Jean Pierrot. The lone figure went back. The group moved. It disappeared into the scrub growth of the mountain.

"It was Maballa," said Philip softly. He placed his hand on Jean's bowed head. "She knew that it was you, Jean."

"Yes, M'sieur, I believe that she did," said Jean.



"I SAW MABALLA AND SHE TOOK ME BY THE HAND"